

By DAVID CUTLER

John Henry Cutler, co-founder and publisher of the *Duxbury Clipper*, author and biographer, and a champion of Duxbury for more than 57 years, died at home Wednesday, Sept. 16. He was 88.

Until his death last week, Cutler was at the *Clipper* office 6 days a week and in recent months had been making preparations to celebrate the newspaper's 50th anniversary in the year 2000.

The *Clipper* was launched on a shoestring budget of about \$450 by John and Bobbie Cutler in May of 1950, just 19 days after they hatched the idea while playing bridge in Duxbury with George and Debbie Nelson. It was Debbie who suggested that Duxbury — then with a year-round population of 3,000 — needed a local paper to chronicle the comings and goings of Duxbury residents. The first issues were printed in Tinkertown at Tom Porter's small print shop on Elm St. Bobbie Cutler, the former Roberta Rand Sumner, died in early 1995. For Bobbie and John, aside from their love of their family and their all-encompassing love for Duxbury, the *Clip-*

per was the closest thing to their hearts.

John Cutler was born in Boston and raised in the Fenway. He was the son of a grocer and was the second son in a family of 4 boys and a girl. He was educated in the Boston schools and did post-graduate work at Boston Latin before entering Harvard College where, as a member of the Class of 1932, he would graduate magna cum laude and go on to earn a Harvard Ph.D. in literature. He had considered attending Harvard Law but put that idea aside to pursue teaching and, after receiving his doctorate, began his career as an instructor in Spanish at Dartmouth College in Hanover, NH. While at Dartmouth, he produced the first of 2 syndicated newspaper columns, a whimsical assembly of little known facts called "Who Is It?" in which readers were asked to identify historical figures. The second column, which sold more widely, was a collection of brain teasers — i.e. "Where can anybody but you sit?" (In your lap.)

In 1940, Cutler was drafted and was most certainly among a select few army privates with a Ph.D. As his brother Chris recounted, he was sometimes a recalci-

trant peace-time soldier. While stationed in Providence, RI, he edited an unofficial and unauthorized post newspaper that took cracks at the brass. On more than one occasion his sass barred him from getting a pass to visit Roberta Sumner, his bride-to-be, in Boston. When World War II broke out, he obtained a commission in the navy, first serving in Brazil, where he befriended heavyweight boxing champion Gene Tunney (who once suggested they go a few rounds) and later as a naval historian and speech writer in the South Pacific and Washington, D.C. Two of his brothers, James and Harry, were killed in action in the European Theater.

Returning to Duxbury after the war, he decided against a full-time career in academia and began to work as a freelance writer, publishing pieces in the Boston Sunday newspapers and in several national magazines, including *Colliers* and *Esquire*. As the '40s wore down, he wrote 3 adventure books based on his experiences in Brazil. One was called *Tom Stetson and the Giant Jungle Ants*. He also taught part time at Boston University. Then

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John during the war years as a Navy Lieutenant.

came the *Clipper*.

For 10 years, the *Clipper* was produced on the dining room table of the Cutlers' home on Washington St. On Mondays and Tuesdays — "Hectic Mondays and Frantic Tuesdays," Bobbie would call them — the dining room was forever abuzz with Duxburyites coming in with last minute ads and news items. That some occasionally found their way under the living room couch or behind the refrigerator underscored the intimacy of working at home. On those hectic and frantic nights, supper was served on the kitchen table.

From the start, Cutler vowed to make the *Clipper* a Duxbury-only newspaper; he once wrote it was more important to Duxburyites that Tom Lawson, then a neighbor, had decided to mow his lawn on Saturday than what



John and Bobbie.

President Harry Truman had to say about Russia's Joe Stalin. The creed to "keep it local, local, local" helped the *Clipper* to establish a rapport with Duxbury that has never been broken. After struggling through the early years — the spaghetti years as Bobbie once described them — the *Clipper* prospered; today it is among a dwindling number of independently-owned newspapers in eastern Massachusetts. As one commentator said, it still has soul.

Despite his writing background, neither of the Cutlers had any newspaper experience when they began their adventure with the *Clipper*. So they made it up as they went along and the result was a spirited sheet with a different kind of newspaper personality. In the begin-

ning, for example, selectmen news was reported by the selectmen's secretary and published under a headline, "Selectmen's Notes." After a series of critical editorials, the dispatches ended despite repeated entreaties from the editor. Exasperated, he finally ran the "Selectmen Notes" headline with a blank space underneath. The dispatches resumed.

The year 1954 was a significant for Duxbury. Hurricane Carol blew in almost unannounced in late summer and battered the town; for a few years Duxbury Beach ceased to exist and elm trees were toppled on St. George St. and Washington St. Instead of lying low as he should have, Editor Cutler spent most of the storm roaming Duxbury to get a first-hand look at the damage...while it was being inflicted.

Earlier that year at the annual town meeting, voters adopted a comprehensive zoning plan that required house lots of one acre. It was a radical move that prompted unending criticism — "elitist," opponents hooted — but once in place it forever changed the future of Duxbury, and John Cutler's constant drumbeat for the plan was probably his most lasting contribution to the town. Years later he opposed with the same fervor a proposal for 2-acre zoning, parting company for the first time with his dear friend Selectman Ed Dondero.

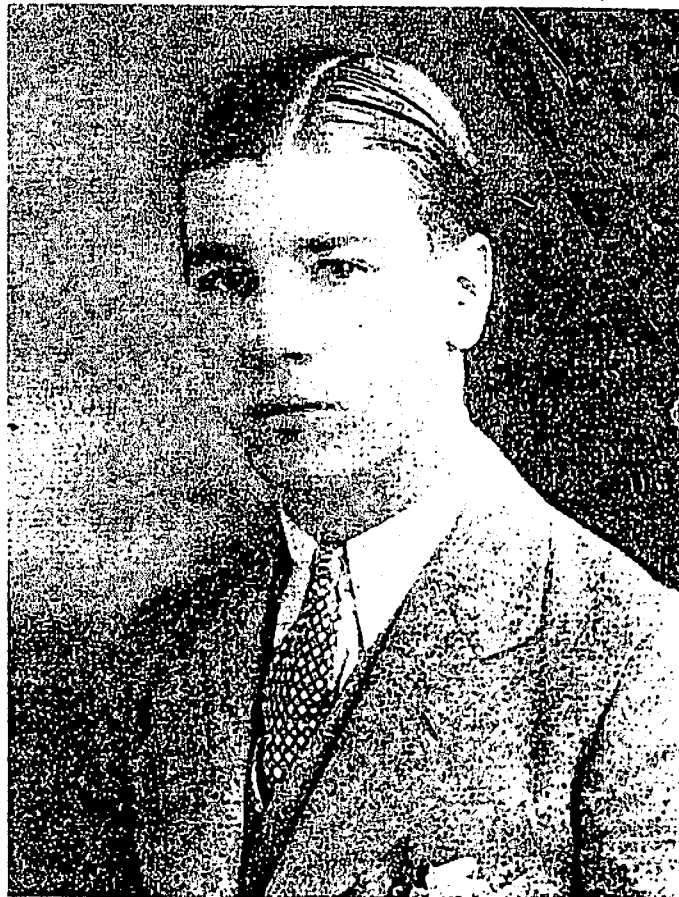
Cutler's clashes with Selectman Paul Barber were of legendary proportion for a small town and went on for several years. In one Clipper, criticizing what he called Barber's imperious nature, the editor ran a brief note with this headline: "L'Etat, C'est Moi." Later the 2 became friends and when Barber ran for the Massachusetts Senate he had the support of the Clipper editor.

Cutler's book-writing career began to accelerate in the late 1950s. He would write 2 books on the Clipper — *Put It on the Front Page, Please!* and *Cancel My Subscription, Please!* — and was the ghost writer of James Michael Curley's best-selling autobiography, *I'd Do It Again*. Curley, the ghost writer wrote later, was a fabulous character and a true "Robin Hood" who would literally give

sparkling conversations, particularly those that could consume the intellect and exchange ideas. He loved words and their etymology and was practically unbeatable at the word game "Ghost."

He took great delight in his grandchildren.

He and Bobbie traveled widely in their later years, both in this country and throughout Europe, but inevitably upon his return he would utter the same refrain: "I love Duxbury." After Bobbie died, he became a



At Harvard.

someone in need the coat off his back. The two spent nearly 6 months together, and by the time the book came out, Cutler could do a perfect impression of Curley's deep, resonating voice — "On my recent visitation to this august establishment..." It was his best and only impression.

Cutler achieved prominence as a Boston historian with his biographies on Richard Cardinal Cushing, the former U.S. Sen. Edward Brooke, and Boston Mayor John Fitzgerald (*Honey Fitz, Three Steps to the White House*) who was President John Kennedy's grandfather. While working on *Honey Fitz*, he received a call from Joseph Kennedy, Sr. (the president's father) suggesting that a book on the late mayor wasn't a very good idea and that he (Kennedy) would have nothing to do with it.

Cutler also wrote a book about the status of women, *What About Women?* and was asked to repair the manuscripts of other writers. One was from a California inmate on death row whose original manuscript was smuggled out of prison on carbon paper; another was written by a dissident from Red China. He also wrote his own autobiography, *Make the Bold Move*, and collaborated

with his book publisher Monroe Stearns to write *Tips on Writing*. His research papers are now on file at Boston University.

An inveterate bridge player, particularly in his youth, Cutler had few hobbies. He read voraciously and was one Red Sox fan who could remember the pitching exploits of Babe Ruth when the Sox ruled the American League and won the World Series. As a boy, he remembers seeing the Babe outside Fenway Park. When not engaged in writing he reveled in what he called

benefactor of Duxbury and made several contributions in her name to Duxbury institutions.

Cutler leaves 2 sons, Robert of Kingston and David of Norwell; 2 daughters, Margaret Chandler of Silver Spring, MD, and Abigail of Duxbury; 4 grandchildren, Joshua of Hull, Benjamin of Hingham, Carolyn of Savannah, GA, and Rebecca of Norwell; and several nieces and nephews. His youngest child, John R. Cutler, died in 1987.

A memorial service will be held Saturday, Sept. 26, at 2 pm in St. John's Episcopal Church, Washington St. In lieu of flowers, donations may be sent to the John R. Cutler Memorial Scholarship Fund at PO Box 1656, Duxbury, MA 02331.



John was an animated conversationalist.